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Mr. SHERIDAN's
S P E E C H

ADDRESSED

To a Number of Gentlemen

Assembled with a V I E W of considering

The best MEANS to establish one good

T H E A T R E

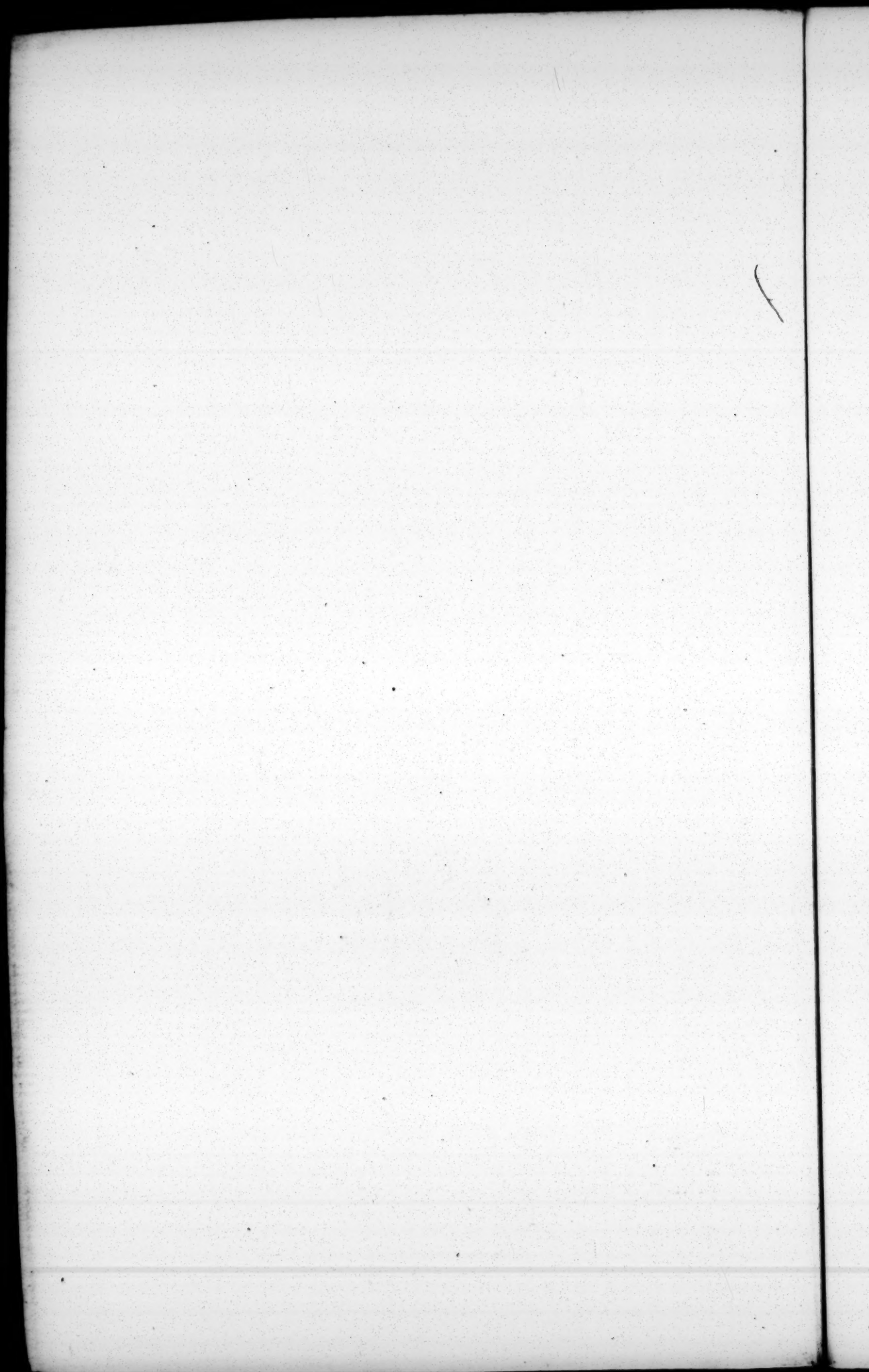
I N T H I S C I T Y.



D U B L I N:

Printed by and for GEORGE FAULKNER, in
Parliament-Street.

M D C C L X X I I.



Mr. Sheridan's Speech,

&c.

GENTLEMEN,

I AM here, at the desire of several persons of distinction, who wish to see the stage once more put on a respectable footing in this city, to give my sentiments on the occasion, and to lay down a method for accomplishing a point, so much, and so generally wished for. That Dublin can not possibly support two theatres is now acknowledged on all hands, and that the present ruinous state of the stage is owing to an attempt to support two, is so obvious that it needs no proof.

The great point to be desired then, is, to establish one theatre only upon a solid permanent foundation.

To point out the only means by which this can be effected is the object of my present address.

After the most mature deliberation upon a subject, which it must be supposed I am well acquainted with, I know but one way by which it is possible to accomplish this; and I doubt not but you will be of the same mind, when you have heard what I have to offer on this head.

In order to this, I shall shew that not only the actual existence, but the possibility of the existence of two theatres again in this city, at least during a limited space of time, will prevent even an attempt to raise the stage from it's present deplorable state. For tho' just now, from recent experience, the general cry is for one theatre, yet there is no certainty how long that may last. Within my memory during the last thirty years the publick opinion in this point has changed several times. When they had but one theatre, they cried out for two, upon the specious but fallacious argument, that it would excite emulation. When the ill effects of two, which the town could not support, were perceived, they then called out for a union as the only means to restore their entertainment. When this was accomplish'd with great difficulty and at a vast expence, in a few years they again called out for two. It was this fluctuating disposition in the town, and the several fruitless attempts

attempts made in consequence of it to support two theatres, which have reduced the stage to it's present state. And this I shall now endeavour to shew, not by speculative reasonings, but by proofs drawn from known and undoubted facts.

The first sole theatre under old Ashbury, of which we have any distinct accounts, subsisted always, if not on a splendid, at least on a decent footing. The actors were paid, and the manager got money. Afterwards, under Tom Elrington, it flourished so much that he was enabled by it to keep a coach, a piece of luxury in those days known only to the more opulent ; and to leave a very handsome provision to his widow. After his death the theatre fell into the hands of several actors, as joint managers and sharers, who made a very comfortable subsistence by it. As the old house was by this time considered to be in a tottering state, several noblemen and gentlemen of fortune built a new theatre in Aungier-street for the use of the sole company of actors then in being, which far exceeded the former in elegance and magnificence. They spared no expence to put it on a par with those of London, in point of wardrobe, scenery, and other decorations, unknown before. With these advantages, and under the patronage of these gentlemen, there was a prospect that the theatre would have flourished more than ever ; but
then

then it was that the idea of a second house first took possession of people's minds; some desperate undertakers built a theatre in Rainsford-street, that place being in the E. of Meath's liberty, and the powerful interest of the Subscribers to Aungier-street being strong enough to prevent their obtaining a licence to open one in the city. It was the fashion for some time, whilst the force of novelty lasted, to frequent this theatre, whilst the other company was playing to empty benches, and starving. In a short time afterwards they shared the same fate; and neither house could pay even half of the stipulated salaries. But tho' the impracticability of supporting two houses was soon perceived, and the many inconveniences resulting from the attempt severely felt, yet when once an opposition is set on foot, it is not an easy matter to put an end to it. There was now a competitorship between the two companies which should destroy the other, and so have the town to themselves. There were also, as is usual on such occasions, zealous partisans of each. The company of Rainsford-street, conscious of the great disadvantage they laboured under in point of situation, had the address to persuade a number of gentlemen who were their partisans, to build a new theatre for them in Smock-alley on the old foundation, as a sure means to give them a superiority over their opponents, from the superior

perior advantage of situation. These gentlemen had interest enough to engage the protection of the city to this theatre, and accordingly it was opened under the authority of the Lord Mayor, and called the City Theatre. But the change of situation was of little advantage to them. Dublin could not support two houses, and the same sum which would have maintained one in credit, when divided between two, could scarce keep them from starving. It was no uncommon thing for the actors during that period to be sometimes two months, sometimes three without receiving a shilling subsistence. Duval the undertaker of this, was in a few years ruined. But the opposition was still continued by a set of actors to whom he let his house. The joint company of actors who had the management of Aungier-street theatre, grown weary of a fruitless contest, and alarmed with the near prospect of starving, and peril of a jail, readily embraced a proposal made to them by the subscribers, of taking the management into their own hands. These were a body of gentlemen considerable for their rank and property. They determined at any expence to strike a blow which would at once put an end to all opposition. They engaged Mr. Quin and Mrs. Cibber, the two most capital performers of the age; and it was thought in general that against such a force, it was impossible that the poor distressed company of
Smock-

Smock-alley could have made any stand. But they did not despair. They had recourse to entertainments of a different kind, and much better adapted to the taste of the million. They brought over the best company of rope-dancers and tumblers that had ever been seen here. They exhibited pantomines, under the direction of Harlequin Philips, in greater perfection than usual. The consequence was, that after a few nights, those two eminent performers played to empty houses. I myself have seen the curtain draw up to one of their best plays, when there was but eight pounds in the house. And so far were the receipts of the theatre from disburfing their expences, that Mrs. Cibber's engagement was made good out of the private purse of one of the subscribers, who had pledged his honour for it. And Mr. Quin, upon perceiving the first tardiness of payment, refused every night to let the curtain be drawn up 'till his money was first brought to him; though what came to his share sometimes exceeded the whole receipt of the night.

The opposition was carried on for two or three years more, during which the proprietors of Aungier-street had run out considerably; and the proprietors of Smock-alley had never received a penny of interest. They therefore at last listened to the general cry of the town, which called loudly for a union, and entered jointly into a law-suit with Duval, and others, to accomplish this point.
But

But finding this was likely to be drawn out into a great length, they came to a compromise with them, and the union was brought about.

The Proprietors of the united Theatres, having thus put an end to opposition, might reasonably hope that they should, in some degree, repair their losses, and in order to this were resolved to give the best entertainment in their power to the town. They culled the most useful performers out of the two companies, and placed Mr. Barry a new and favourite Actor at their head. They engaged Mr. and Mrs. Arne and Mr. Lowe, all then in great vogue, to exhibit entertainments in the musical way. Mademoiselle Chateaufneuf, the first capital dancer that had appeared in this kingdom, was also engaged. Such extraordinary preparations seemed to bid fair for success equal to their most sanguine expectations. Yet will it be credited when it is told, that this united company of culled actors, with Mr. Barry at their head, with those extraordinary aids before-mentioned, in a short time after opening, hardly ever played to charges[†] and in the midst of the season gave out plays, and dismissed for want of audiences for a fortnight together. This must appear one of the most extraordinary events in the annals of the stage, to those who are conversant with theatrical affairs, 'till they are told that the proprietors, having refused to agree with

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Harlequin

† A cant term of the Theatre for the "Daily expences of the house".

Harlequin Philips upon terms which they judged unreasonable, that enterprising genius built a little theatre in Capel-street; and having formed a company out of those who had been rejected, with the addition of some strollers and volunteers, upon the strength of bewitching pantomime, and the aid of tumblers and rope-dancers, was able to foil the best concerted plan for public entertainment that had ever been laid in this city.

Could there be a stronger proof given that it is impossible any theatre can flourish here, when there is the smallest opposition given to it? If there were occasion for an additional proof of this, a recent event of a parallel kind most amply confirms it.

Bad payments were the consequence of bad receipts; and after enduring great hardships for some time, the performers of any merit, to the number of fourteen, abandoned the place, to seek their fortunes elsewhere, and left Dublin without a stage.

In this forlorn and desperate state of things, I took a lease of the Theatres, loaded with a variety of incumbrances, occasioned by the several oppositions. Amongst which there were no less than sixty free transferable tickets, belonging to the subscribers of the united Theatres. The persons who had given up their several interests, in order to accomplish a union, such as Duval, R. Elrington, Layfield, Vanderbank, &c. had annuities to the amount of upwards of 400l. per

per ann. The ground-rent, taxes, &c. of both houses, with a rent of 200l. per ann. to the proprietors, made the whole a heavy burthen. Soon after my entering on the undertaking, a company of strollers formed an opposition in the Capel-street theatre, with which I found myself so much galled, that I took a lease of that theatre for twenty-one years, merely to shut it up, which was an additional burthen.

The difficulties I had to encounter in reforming the most disorderly theatre perhaps in the world, are set forth at large in a pamphlet lately reprinted, called an Appeal to the Public; to which I refer all those who are desirous to be more minutely acquainted with the rise, progress and downfall of the Irish stage. I shall here mention only a few facts, to shew what a rapid progress was made in the improvement of it. The highest salaries given previous to that period were in general twenty shillings a week, two performers only having been raised so high as to thirty. In a few years after, this sum was paid to figure dancers. The musicians had before but half a crown a night; and as there were but two plays in the week, their pay amounted to but five shillings a week. The lowest of the band had afterwards twenty shillings per week; some of the better performers had from thirty to forty shillings; and the leader of the band, Signor Pasquali, had three hundred pounds for the

*See it
in Trach
Vol. 27.*

season. The wardrobe of the united theatres, was valued by sworn appraisers at 200*l*. The wardrobe in my possession four years after cost me upwards of 4000*l*. The highest expences of the theatre before did not exceed 1500*l*. In four years time the whole of my expences for one season only amounted to 8000*l*.

During the space of six years after it's establishment, it was allowed by all who had had an opportunity of making the comparison, that no theatre in Europe was in a more flourishing condition, or under better regulations. Notwithstanding this, the cry for two houses was again raised in spite of former experience. Another theatre was built by subscription at Crow-street, though I then proved to the public by unanswerable arguments, that it must necessarily end in the ruin of the undertakers, and the total destruction of the stage. My prediction was too fatally verified by the event. Mr. Woodward, who was a partner with Mr. Barry in the undertaking, was in a few years glad to extricate himself from the desperate situation into which he had been plunged, with the loss of all he had been amassing during his life. Mr. Barry continued some years longer in this hopeless undertaking, yearly accumulating new debts, 'till they amounted to the enormous sum of eight thousand pounds and upwards. The melancholy fate which attended the opposition in the other house

house is too well known to need any farther mention of it. And you are all judges of the present state of both.

It was so clear to me that any opposition must end in the ruin of both parties, that when I found it could not be prevented, I parted with a property which had cost me above 8000*l.* and the labour of twelve of my best years, for only 1000*l.* I shewed at that time to demonstration, that an opposition would reduce the stage to a lower state, than even that in which I found it, wretched as it then was. I shall now shew how amply this has been verified.

I have before enumerated the several incumbrances brought upon the stage, by the union of the two theatres of Aungier-street and Smock-alley; a heavy burthen! under which I long laboured. Now upon another union of the two theatres of Smock-alley and Crow-street, the only apparent way, as things are now circumstanced, to put an end to a ruinous opposition, the incumbrances would be fourfold of what they formerly were. There would be now, instead of sixty, no less than two hundred free transferable tickets, which at the lowest valuation, at ten guineas each the season, would amount to two thousand guineas per ann. The several rents, ground-rents, taxes, repairs, annuities, and interest to the proprietors, would amount to a thousand a year more. And I will venture to affirm, that no manager will

will ever be able to support a stage in Dublin with credit, who should be incumbered with more than a sixth part of that sum. But beside all this, there are so many mortgages, and such a variety of claimants upon these theatres, that there would scarce be a possibility of getting a good title, or securing for any time a peaceable possession. In short, the burthen in this case would be so great, that the shoulders of an Atlas would not be able to support it. No actor of consequence, or person of property, will ever engage in so desperate an undertaking. Can it be supposed, that any one acquainted with the history of the Irish stage, who knows that from the first setting up of two theatres in Dublin to this hour, every undertaker has either run out considerably, or been totally ruined, will engage in so desperate a project, under still encreasing loads, and accumulated disadvantages. Who that has heard of the great losses sustained by the proprietors, of the ruin of Duval, Sheridan, Barry, Woodward, Mossop, who have been the several managers during the last thirty years, will be ambitious of following their example? None surely but such as are desperate, and have nothing to lose, will ever engage in it again, while it remains in its present state. For my own part, I solemnly declare, that if the entire possession of both theatres, free from all incumbrances, were now offered to me, I would not embark again in the management,

nagement, without an absolute certainty that no other theatre, during a certain space, could open against me. After my former experience, after having lost twelve of my best years in endeavouring to establish a good stage upon a lasting foundation, can it be supposed that I will enter again, at this time of life, upon so precarious an undertaking? What security could I have, after once more passing some years in re-establishing the stage, that the very same consequences would not follow, to my inevitable ruin, at a time of life when I could not have the smallest prospect or hope of extricating myself, or retrieving lost time? Surely this would be the height of infatuation. No, while it were possible that even the little theatre in Capel-street could open against me, it would be downright madness to make the attempt. Is it to be expected that any one would lay out larger sums upon the improvement of a farm, when he is only tenant at will? Would any one in his senses think of inclosing a common at great expence, of manuring and tilling the ground, when it is in the power of any one that pleases to break down the inclosure, and claim an equal right to the produce of the soil? This has been always the actual state of the theatre in Ireland. While it was inclosed, it produced good crops to the possessors. When the fences were broke down, it of course became a waste; and it is now rendered so entirely a waste, that it probably

probably never will be inclosed again, unless a law be made to secure the property to the undertaker.

This can be done only, as in the case of other commons, by an act of the legislature. If there be any who think this an object not worthy of their attention, it must be from not having properly considered the importance of the subject, and their being accustomed to look upon the stage in the light of amusement only. Whereas in all civilized and well regulated states, from the first institution of the stage to this hour, that noblest, and most rational of public entertainments, has always been considered as an object that merited the utmost attention of the ruling powers in each. In Athens, where it first took it's rise, it was always under the direction of the chief magistrates: and we may see in what high estimation it was held among that wise and polished people, when we are assured that no less a sum than one hundred thousand pounds sterl. of the public money was expended upon the decoration of a single play of Sophocles. At Rome it was supported at a great expence under the direction of the Magistrates. It is the same in the several states of Italy, and in many of the Courts of Germany. The King of France has established but one Theatre at Paris, under the wisest regulations, and it has always been the most flourishing of any in Europe. But

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to come nearer home. The stage in London, 'till within these last thirty years, was upon the same precarious footing as with us, and Cibber has clearly shewn in his history of it, that the same consequences followed from it. He there points out the ill effects that followed from two theatres even in that immense, and most opulent of cities. But when they multiplied to five, the evil was so sensibly felt, that it roused the attention of the legislature, who made a law confining them to two in London. There have been since several acts of parliament made, granting exclusive patents to different undertakers in Edinburgh, Bristol, Bath, Liverpool,* Birmingham, Norwich, Portsmouth, and some other great towns. In consequence of which, elegant theatres, and decent companies, who are regularly paid, have been established in all those places. Whereas previous to the parliamentary security given to the property of the undertakers, they were infested with troops of miserable strollers, often opposing and starving each other in Barns. In short, this is the only civilized country ever known, where the polite arts have been introduced, in which the Legislature, or ruling power, has not taken cognisance of the stage, and established it upon a solid foundation. This is the more wonderful, because upon the slightest examination it would appear to be a point of more conse-

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quence

** neither Birmingham nor Portsmouth has
a Patent Theatre.*

quence to this city, than to any other in Europe. It has been allowed on all hands, that one of the greatest evils under which this poor country labours, is the number of absentees; and what more likely means to continue and increase this evil, than the neglect of furnishing public amusements? What man of independent fortune will stay in a place where he can have no entertainment but what is merely sensual? The mind has it's appetite as strong for it's own gratifications as the body has; it will hunger and thirst after it's own proper food, and if it be starved here, will certainly remove to a land of plenty; to a neighbouring country of the same language, manners, laws; a mother country too, so much superior to this in many articles, and which has so many other inducements to attract the natives of this Island to settle there.

This is not the case of any other capital in Europe. In every other country, whatever may be the state of their public diversions, they are content with them, they know no better. They have no temptation to go to foreign countries; or if they did, the difference of language, manners, &c. would prevent their taking any great delight in their public entertainments to the prejudice of their own. But it is not so with us. From the frequent visits paid by the inhabitants of this kingdom to London, they have an opportunity of comparing the
state

state of the stage there, with that at home; and if the latter fall far short of the former, they will have no relish for the entertainment, and will desert the Theatre. There was a time when the Dublin stage would not yield the palm to the best of those in London. And they would now find it very difficult to cull such a set of performers, out of both the London Theatres, as were then established here. Accordingly there was a great resort of company to the House, which afforded five nights entertainment in the week, often to full, and always to good Audiences. And all the young men of quality and fortune bred up in those days, who had an opportunity by travelling of visiting the different Theatres of Europe, declared themselves as well satisfied with their own as with any they had seen; and that they were as well amused, and could pass their time as agreeably in Dublin, as any where else.

There has been enough said to shew that this is an object well worth the attention of the Legislature, in a political light; but there is another article of the utmost importance to be taken into consideration, which is the morals of the youth of this Kingdom. If there be no entertainments provided for the evenings, will they not necessarily be precipitated into gaming or drinking, to pass away their time, which otherwise must lye a heavy burthen on

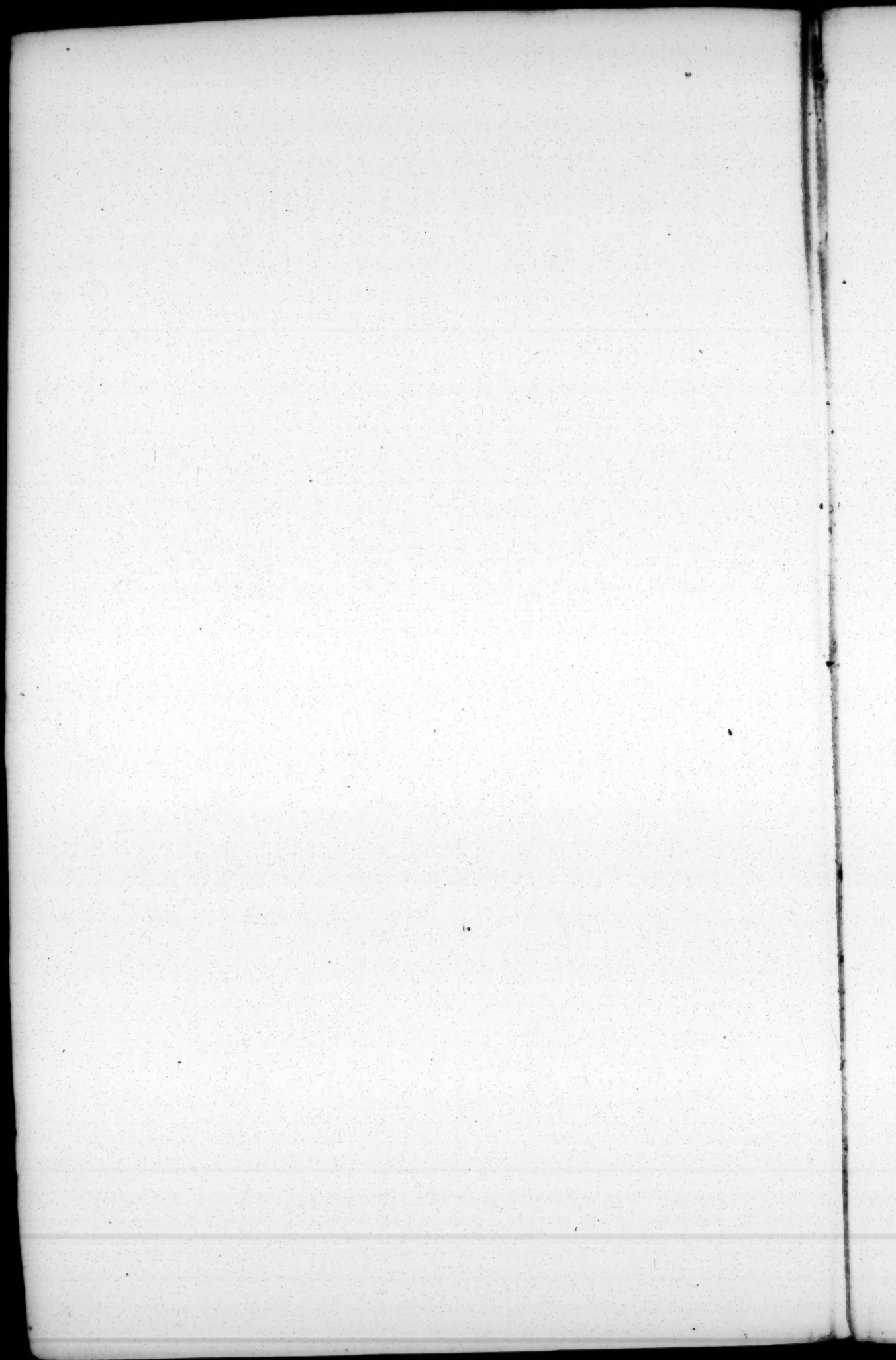
their hands? To enter into a detail of all the evils which have followed, and must for ever attend a low and disorderly stage, would swell this discourse to an enormous size. There has been enough said to demand the most serious attention of all who wish well to the interests of this country in general, or to those of this city in particular.

But it will be objected, that if only one theatre be established by law, it may be in the power of the manager to give what entertainment he pleases, and the town in that case would be without resource. But pray what resource have they now? Do they find their entertainment improved in consequence of the contest between two theatres? Are the fruits of this boasted emulation so palatable, that they are loth to change them? But it is to no purpose to enter into any argument upon this subject; for as two theatres can not possibly subsist in this town, a monopoly must of course ensue from necessity, it not from parliament. The only question now is, which of these two ways is the most eligible. In the one case, I have already shewn, that a theatre under such heavy incumbrances must for ever remain in the lowest state. In the other, it may again raise it's head, and be restored to it's former lustre. There is no alternative left, but either to sit down supinely content with

with such a single stage as would be worse than none, and rather be a nuisance than a benefit to the public, or that they who have the power should exert themselves in pursuing the only possible method by which it may once more be placed in a flourishing state, and answer all the good purposes which flow from a well established, well regulated stage.

It is by the desire of several persons of rank and fortune that this meeting has been called, in order to accomplish this point. They propose to form themselves into a society in union with all such gentlemen as are desirous of promoting the undertaking, and out of the body to choose a committee, in order to prepare and conduct the business for them. They are of opinion that the best way of applying to parliament, will be by petition from the inhabitants of this city, which they make no doubt will be signed by a great majority of the more respectable names. When such a society is formed, and a committee chosen, I shall lay before them a plan, which, if carried into execution, will in a short time establish here the best stage for dramatic performances of any in the British dominions, and probably continue it such to perpetuity.

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